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Editorial

FULFILLING THE LAW OF CHRIST THE JOY OF THE VICARIOUS SUFFERER

O fellow-bearers of the load we did not choose, the load we fain would have some other carry if we could, remember this—the burden-bearers help the world along! I know not how it is. I know not all the law. I am only sure of this: the fight that each man fights behind his chamber door for courage and for patience and for faith, he fights not for himself alone, he fights for all mankind; he fights as one who is a helper of his kind, as a blood brother of that One who, in little Galilee, obscure, almost alone, was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, and who upon the cross became the burden-bearer of the human race.

These are the words of a modern Christian, written when, after ten years of notable service in the ministry and four years of struggle with disease, he was facing inevitable death. They are the product, not of the atmosphere of the school, but of the deep experience of a soul grappling with dreadful and dreaded realities. Yet they are, perhaps because of this, but an echo of the teaching of Jesus in the gospels. They repeat what he learned, as he took upon himself the burdens of men and bore them into the face of death. For when Jesus declared that, except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die, it shall bear much fruit, he stated this not as a special burden laid on him but as the law for all mankind. And when Peter repudiated Jesus' declaration that he must die, the Lord's answer was not that this was his special task, but that it was for all who would be his disciples to take up the cross and follow him. "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ," writes the

Apostle Paul. The law of vicarious suffering and redemption through that suffering is written large, as universal law, not in the Old and New Testaments only but in all human history and experience.

Is it not strange that the Christian world has been so slow to grasp this great truth, so clearly taught by the prophet of the Exile and by the Christ, and, as in the instance we have cited, again and again learned in the school of deep experience? What joy would come into many lives if their sufferings and disappointments could be dignified and glorified by the thought that through these things one becomes "a helper of his kind, a blood brother of that One who, in little Galilee, obscure, almost alone, was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities." What inspiration would come into Christian effort to bring blessing to the world, if we could firmly grasp and joyously accept the fact that what Christ did for the world it is for us also in our measure to do. Can there be to struggling souls any more heartening Christmas message than this, that they who suffer may, if they will, fill up that which is lacking of the sufferings of the Christ, and so suffering, share in his redemptive work? For while there are tasks still unfulfilled, wrongs still to be righted, and good still to be achieved, the measure of those sufferings will still remain unfulfilled.

THE LAW OF LIFE THROUGH DEATH APPLIES TO THOUGHTS ALSO

But there is another aspect of this matter that challenges thought. Is it perhaps true that the transformation of the simple teaching of Jesus into the manifold doctrines of atonement, which have in successive ages satisfied the thought of the church and seemingly contributed to its development, itself constitutes an illustration of the principle that the grain of wheat must be cast into the ground if it would bring forth much fruit? The thought of Jesus was clear: what he himself did in becoming a burden-bearer for his fellow-men was but the type of that which belongs to all good men to do; they too must be ready to lay down their lives a ransom for others. But as that thought went out into the world it encountered Jewish rabbinism, and Greek philos-

ophy, and Roman legalism, and in the process of entering into the thought of the nations took upon itself their burden. It must have been so. The principle of life through death applies to thoughts as well as to lives. The saving truth must mingle with the life that it will save, and suffer in the mingling. And so the simple but profound thought of Jesus became Hebraized, Hellenized, Romanized. To have remained pure, it must perhaps have remained also unfruitful. The leaven must mingle with the meal and transform it, but the resultant loaf will not be wholly unaffected by the character of the meal. It is the glory of Christianity that it can enter into the life of every nation. Christianity in the Greek, the Latin, the German will be Christianity, but in each it will have its own peculiarities, otherwise it would be an exotic in the midst of the national life, and by so much ineffective.

THE NECESSITY OF FREQUENT RETURN TO FIRST PRINCIPLES

But because these things are so, it is necessary that ever and again we re-examine our resultant Christianity—analyze it into its elements, discriminate the simple message of Jesus from the accretions that have attached themselves to it as it has come down through the centuries and mingled with the life of the nations. Not, indeed, that we shall reject from our religion everything that is not from the first century, or assume that all that Christianity has gathered to itself in nineteen centuries is evil; God is still revealing himself in the history of events and in the hearts of men, and new truth is as true as the old. But the accretions that have served their day and become only hindering encumbrances must be stripped away; and there is great value in the effort, with undimmed eye and unprejudiced vision, to see once more the majestic figure of the great founder of our religion and to hear his message in its original simplicity.

It is especially to this end that Christian scholarship has been directing its efforts of late. Availing itself of the development of a keener historic sense and of the openness of mind that is characteristic of our day, it has gained, we believe, a clearer understanding than any previous age has possessed of the great thoughts of Jesus which have been the seed of the church.

THE COST OF SIMPLIFYING CHRISTIANITY

It is fortunate that this is the case; for there is great need at this present hour of the rejuvenation of the Christian message. The avenues of communication between the nations of the world are open as never before in its history. We are already in the midst of a new era in the progress of Christianity. Not only by conscious effort, but by forces which the church did not create and cannot control, our modern Christianity is coming as never before into a closeness of contact with the life of non-Christian peoples that involves results of vast moment. For such a time we need a message free from all needless encumbrances. But it is not to be forgotten that this closer contact of our faith with the nations of the world and their religious life will not be without its price of suffering; the service that we render to them will be at the cost to us not only of money and of toil, but of pain. Our western Christianity, endeared to us and modified by many a struggle and conflict, must, as it comes into contact with new civilizations, again be cast as seed into the ground to die and by dying bring forth fruit. It must mingle with the life of the people and in the process of mingling suffer changes. And it will bring pain to the Christian missionary as he sees the cherished ritual of his church, or the form of its ecclesiastical organization, or the doctrinal expressions of its faith discarded or modified by those who receive his message. This is the sacrifice that Christianity ever asks of those who become its bearers, a part of the price we must pay for the joy of walking in the footsteps of Jesus.

THE NEED OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLIFICATION

But this in turn raises the question, whether we as occidental Christians shall impose upon the new East the whole burden of discrimination and elimination, or shall voluntarily, though at pain to ourselves, leave behind all that is not central and vital to our Christian message. As the great Far East asks today, with new interest and respect, What is Christianity? shall that which we offer them in reply be our western theology and ecclesiasticism, including elements learned from the Jewish rabbi, the Greek

philosopher, the Roman lawyer, the German scholar, and the American evangelist, and diversified into many types bearing many sectarian and sectional names? Or shall we imitate the example which the apostle Paul set us when he cut away from the gospel that he preached to the gentiles all those elements, ancient and sacred though they were, which could not serve their religious needs? And shall we seek to find that heart and center of our Christianity which, in whatever combination with local and temporary thought, has among all peoples had in it the power to enlighten and redeem men and to create for itself in every new situation its own forms of expression? Shall we seek to force upon the East an occidentalized Christianity, or, as nearly as we may, give them the religion of Jesus in its utmost simplicity?

What will be the outcome of those unparalleled opportunities of peaceful conquest that now confront Christianity will depend in no small measure on the answer that is given to this question. Except the grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it shall bring forth much fruit.